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ACCORDING TO WHICH DECLARATION WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?

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Scientific writing is full of clichés, not necessarily due to authors' mincing ways, rather to consuetude, or induced by the context or encouraged by publishers, editors, reviewers or funding agencies.

In the preface of their books, authors ceremoniously declare exaggerated gratitude to their partner and family who “supported and encouraged” them throughout their Herculean (yet worthwhile) effort. They try hard to argue that their grant proposals have an impact, often by invoking improbable therapeutic, educational or social applications deriving from the proposed studies. In covering letters they almost invariably assert the novelty and originality of their findings, even if they introduced marginal changes in the details of the experimental design of previous studies. This emphasis on novelty and originality is due in part to the diffuse prejudice that replication studies are worthless and should be discouraged. In describing their experimental work, they claim that their findings “shed light” and “uncover missing links”, as if their study were conclusive and decisive, thus anticipating the content of the future press release. In contrast, we all consistently round off our discussions stating that “more research is needed”, which reads like a self-promoting advertisement to avoid future unemployment, but shows perhaps that we are aware of the minimal contribution to knowledge of most of our studies.

It is also customary to see in the method section of papers the phrase “the study received ethical approval and is conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki”. But was it?

Ethics is very relevant in our work (Cubelli and Della Sala, 2015). Yet the sentence is like a mantra, a formula added to manuscripts to placate supercilious editors. The common reference to the Helsinki Declaration is problematic. This first version of the document was presented in 1964; it did not contemplate the existence of Ethics Committees, which were introduced in 1975 in the Tokyo amendment of the document. After Helsinki, the “Ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects” have been amended nine times, the

last in Fortaleza, Brazil, in 2013. Rather than automatically including these sentences in the manuscripts, authors would do better knowing what they are writing about and increase their awareness of ethical issues in our research. The accuracy of wording reflects the correctness of how ethics issues have been dealt with.

Cortex has received papers stating that they abide by these ethical principles, including the right of the participants to be fully acquainted with the scope and the requirements of the study, and be able to offer informed consent. Yet, not uncommonly it appears obvious that the participants recruited for the study could not have been fully aware of the aims and procedures of the study when apparently deciding to partake. Recently for instance, a paper claimed that the patient whose case the authors were reporting on gave full consent in writing to be assessed. However, as reported by the authors themselves, the patient was severely aphasic and unable to understand oral or written language if not for the utmost simplest sentences.

Learning about the researchers' distraught yet benevolent families, or enduring their urge of shedding light, showing impact, novelty or originality, is small endeavour; but the triviality that we may need further research should be banned. As ultimate studies do not exist, further research does not need to be auspicated or predicted. More seriously, the noble principles of the Helsinki Declaration should not be transmuted into inconsequential clichés. Authors should be precise with them, as much as they are in all the other sections of the manuscript, and should follow Cortex instructions accurately:

(<https://www.elsevier.com/journals/cortex/0010-9452/guide-for-authors>). In the reviewing process of manuscripts to be considered for publication in Cortex, the appropriateness and consistency of how ethics duties have been addressed and described will be scrutinized carefully.

References

Cubelli, R. and Della Sala, S. (2015). Cooperation between neuropsychology researchers and ethical committees: Room for improvement? *Cortex*, 71: A1-A2.